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Mourning

In his *Mourning Diary,* written in the 1970s, Roland Barthes observed that "All wise societies… have prescribed and codified the exteriorization of mourning," adding that it is a "pity our own denies mourning" (2009: 167). What Barthes elucidates here has otherwise been demonstrated by historians (see Ariés 1981; Vovelle 1983): the processes by which death in the late twentieth century in the urban West has become an ostensible taboo, with the public expression of loss instrumentalized and orchestrated, sometimes censored and controlled, and above all denied. As literary theorist Gail Holst-Warhaft puts it, "grief today is often seen as a psychological problem: the bereaved are encouraged to seek counselling or take antidepressants" (Holst-Warhaft 2000: 11). At the same time the internalization of loss remains articulated in external objects and through the mediation of representations. As Holst-Warhaft puts it, "We live with the photographs of our dead, lamenting our failure to lament" (1992: 194).

Although the "psychologized" conception of mourning as a passive, introspective, and even denied process seems distinctly contemporary, Freud's 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia" reveals that mourning had not been understood at all as a pathology but as the necessary process of "offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live" (Freud 1991: 267). Rather, Freud regarded the incorporative mechanism of melancholia as signaling the incompletion or failure of overcoming the loss of the beloved object, leading to a pathological situation of substituting object-cathexis with identification for the ego: "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." Seeking to understand "the work that mourning performs" (1991: 368), Freud considered mourning a process whose successful completion signifies the overcoming of the attachment to the lost object, and the reintegration of the bereaved individual to the social world. Taking up the Freudian idea about mourning as a performed work, this entry seeks to open up the critical frame through which post-psychoanalytical readings of Freud have argued that mourning is not an exclusively individual or private procedure, but a potentially public, political (Butler 2004), and even militant act (Crimp 1987). Adopting this performative lens, the entry focuses on the exteriorized and theatrical life of mourning, offering short case-studies of the performance of ritual lamentation in classical Athens, early Eastern Christianity, and contemporary rural Greece as examples of its exhibitory cultural dynamics.

Although psychoanalytical interpretive methodology borrowed some of its terms of reference from the ancient Greek drama, Freud emphasized the formation of the character rather than the public, performative dimension of the plays (somewhat problematically transposing the literary development of the latter onto his account of the formation of modern subjectivities). In this sense, as Olga Taxidou (2004) has shown, Freudian psychoanalysis could be situated within the transcendental and *anti-theatrical* conception of tragedy that constitutes its mainstream reception within the Western philosophical tradition. As she explains, from Plato to George Steiner (1996), tragedy has been read philosophically as a trope consistent with the universalist tendency of humanism, and therefore is existential, anti-historical, and apolitical. Taxidou argues that through the abstract conceptualization of tragedy, this metaphysical and idealist tradition diminished the role of mourning in the Athenian theatre along with (or because of) its connections with *mimesis* and femininity. In contrast, she advances a reading of tragedy as a process of mourning that accentuates its historical materiality as a performative, gendered and political process.

In accordance with Taxidou's historicized understanding of mourning as performance, this entry begins by considering the representation

of ritual lamentation (*thrênos*) in ancient Greece. We situate this practice in the historical context of the recently installed democratic regime and the parallel emergence of tragedy and funeral oration, and examine the politics of its proscription in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*. Shifting from philosophy to the law and from the stage to quotidian life, the performative expression of mourning will be analyzed in relation to the various curtailments and restrictions upon it that take place simultaneously with the emergence of the city-state. Moving between politics and religion, Platonic resonances within early Eastern Christianity are discussed through critical consideration of the various attempts made by the official clergy to eliminate the performative aspects of mourning. Finally, by means of a short snapshot of the performance of mourning in contemporary rural Greece, we propose to situate ritual lament in relation to its problematic co-existence with both the church and contemporary medicalized attitudes toward death. This diachronic reading of a specific geographical context does not imply any claim to cultural continuity. Rather, it seeks to provide an ensemble of case-studies that allow us to address the question of mourning as performance through the example of ritual lamentation in its representation on the theatrical stage as well as in its various tensions with political and/or religious formations.

Ritual Lament in Ancient Greece

But what do we mean by lament? According to anthropologist James Wilce, lament can be defined as a "typically improvisational genre in which women (and some men) have expressed grief and aired grievances, one in which communities have ritually reconstituted themselves in the face of loss" (2009: 2). Lament usually combines vocal, verbal, and corporeal expressions of mourning; it is a "blend of words, tears, and melody" (Wilce 2009: 1). In the context of ancient Greece, ritual lament was not an outburst of grief but a clearly structured form of oral poetry and bodily performance. It was separated in several stages, commencing after the moment of dying with the wake (*próthesis*), continuing with the funeral procession (*ekforá*), and coming to an initial completion with the burial (*taphé*), although it was usually repeated in various commemorations of the dead. As Margaret Alexiou informs us, there was a clear gendered distinction in the roles taken during the ritual: "The ritual formality of the men, who enter in procession usually from the right arm raised in a uniform gesture, contrasts sharply with the wild ecstasy of the women, who stand round the bier in varying attitudes and postures" (1974: 6). According to literary and archaeological evidence, the latter's movements included raising the hands toward the sky, tearing their hair, lacerating their cheeks, and hitting their chests. The group of women usually was comprised of the kinswomen of the dead and professional mourners, singing antiphonally a set of verses followed by a refrain of cries (Alexiou 1974: 12).

Philosophy against Lament

The importance of these "hired songs," forbidden by Plato in *Laws* (Alexiou 1974: 10), implies that ritual lament not only was highly performative in its theatrical aspects but that its professionalization was inextricably linked to the actorly work of mimesis. Accordingly, Ismail Kadaret (1999) suggested that the origins of theater should not be seen in Dionysian festivities but in the performance of death rites. Despite its speculative nature, the relevance of Kadaret's suggestion is that he considers the professional mourner as a sort of "primal actress," in the sense that she enacts an artful performance of pain over the tombs of strangers. And it is precisely this theatrical aspect that Plato abhorred and excluded. Whereas recent evaluations of the concept of mimesis stress its positivity as a productive rather than imitative process, being able to foster new forms and meanings (Halliwell 2002: 21; Lacoue-Labarthe 1998: 80), the ancient philosopher's view of mimesis is

reductive in two ways. First, it is the imitation of reality, which in its turn is the imitation of the Idea, according to Plato. Second, it is regarded by him as a source of contamination, and communicable contagion, in need of containment and restriction. Thus, Plato expelled from his Republic both tragedy and lamentation, cautioning against the creative "fabrications" of the former and the latter's potential to "feminize" citizens. Moreover, he argues that, through its passionate musical modes and its excessive corporeality, the theatricality of lamentation creates contagious feelings and can derange a man's soul and mind. But to what extent does the tragic stage itself evidence the Platonic perception of its "dangerous" effects?

From Ritual Lament to Tragedy and Funeral Oration

Scenes of ritual lamentation abound in ancient tragedy. However, these moments of exteriorized mourning are usually connected to the "Other" of the Athenian city-state: the woman, the fool, or the stranger. Greek male actors might have emitted piercing screams, lacerated their cheeks or torn their clothes on stage; however, a look at the significant earliest and latest of the extant Greek plays, the *Persians* (472 B.C.E.) and the *Bacchae* (405 B.C.E.) confirms that lament is diametrically disconnected from self-possessed masculinity, appearing through a sort of "drag performance" (Taxidou 2004: 91) that embodies otherness. This is given bodily shape and form in the dramatic representation of the figures of an oriental mourning mother (Atossa), a transvestite king (Pentheus), and the oriental aristocrats of an older age (the court of Xerxes). Tellingly, when the representation of mourning concerned the city-state itself, as it was the case with Phrynichus' play *The Capture of Miletus* (which referred to the conquest of this Athenian colony by the Persians), the poet was sanctioned and fined "for reminding them of their own misfortunes (*oikeia kaka*)" (Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, VI, 20, cited in Loraux 2002: 43) and a decree was issued prohibiting the production of any play on the subject. Phrynichus took care to transpose the performance of mourning to the "Others" in his next play, *Phoenissae* (476 B.C.E.) whose plot, rearranged by Aeschylus in *The Persians* some years later, represented the devastating defeat of the Persians in the battle of Salamis.

At the same historical moment that tragic distanciation and the staged mourning-as-otherness emerged in the city-state, legislative measures were taken in order to curtail female lamentation in everyday life. As Nicole Loraux (1990) has shown, the second democratic genre par excellence that appears in parallel to the theatre also concerns the regulation of the performance of mourning: the official funeral oration (*epitaphios logos*) for the citizen-soldiers (*polites-oplites*) who died in war. Significantly, this speech is also performed by men, and takes place in front of a cenotaph. A study of these texts, for example Thucydides' account of Pericles' funeral oration, helps us to understand the significance of the shift from performative excess to discursive reason; in other words, from the corporeal and vocal mourning of bereaved women facing the real bodies of the dead, to female silence and male speech about death in front of a monument symbolizing absent dead bodies. Loraux underlined the ways cities sought to expel from their political sphere practices and emotions that could put their harmony in danger, explaining that "mourning is among those, and it may even be a privileged example" (1998: 20). Her main hypothesis is that the intention of the patriarchal "[c]ivic laws mean to curb maternal mourning; tragedy, because it distinguishes between the political and the nonpolitical sphere, recognizes that mothers alone are in fact the true regulators of mourning, before checking again, in a very civic way, the predictable excess of their grief—mothers will not see their sons dead" (1998: 28). Without speculating about the possibility of political funerals being undertaken by ancient Greek mothers in search of justice, perhaps similar to twentieth-century women's movements

such as the Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo* (Taylor 1997), Loraux emphasizes the existence of such acts in tragedies as *Antigone*. Rather than readily accepting a claim to mourning rights and rites as a necessarily subversive act, Loraux reinscribes an historical understanding of "what tragic freedom consists of and what constraints are called for to make a fiction acceptable" (1998: 28).

Ritual Lament and the Law

But what happens, then, outside the delimitations of fiction and beyond the strictures of Platonic philosophy? In other words, how do civic laws operate in order to curtail excessive female lamentation, and how is this resisted or re-negotiated? During the sixth century B.C.E., law-giver Solon prohibited "everything disorderly and excessive in women's festivals, processions [exodoi] and funeral rites" (Plutarch, *Solon* 21.4, tr. Alexiou 1974). Similar measures were imposed in several parts of the Greek world in the late sixth and the early fifth centuries B.C.E., and evidence shows that these were linked to the passage from aristocracy to democracy in the states in which they took place. It is worth noting that, for instance, such laws had never been imposed in the oligarchic Sparta. As classicist Helen Foley succinctly summarizes, "the general rise of the city-state in Athens apparently brought with it a deliberate curtailment of death rites" (2001: 22). In this move toward the new democratic regime, Cleisthenes restructured the traditional family-based clans into ten new tribes set up according to the area of residence (*deme*). Before him, Solon had also tried to diminish the family-unit by undoing its obligatory connection with the right to inherit. If, as Alexiou had shown, the latter was in ancient Greece "directly linked to the right to mourn" (1974: 20), and female mourners, as carriers of memory, were seen as enforcing the primacy of blood kinship, their banning from the public sphere may "have served to foster the interests of the state and public unity over those of the family" (Foley 2001: 23). In addition, the political shift in allegiance from blood-based kinship to state-citizenship had also been marked by the attempt to confine feuds between clans. Holding onto the memory of those murdered, long-standing lamentation was regarded as simultaneously nourishing the passion for their revenge and the perpetuation of the blood circle.

Ritual Lament in Eastern Christianity

If the Athenian city-state expelled ritual lamentation from the domain of the political, by substituting its excessive pathos with the moderated prose of the funeral oration, as well as by incorporating its representation on the tragic stage, then an historical jump to the early centuries of Eastern Christianity would not seem entirely inappropriate or inaccurate, in the sense that it provides a complementary example of the ways in which the performance of mourning is, *mutatis mutandis*, similarly expelled from the sphere of the religious. While Plato had banned both theatre and mourning as "bad philosophy" (Taxidou 2004: 164), it is likewise well known that the Christian church has long been set against the disruptive potentiality of theatre, mourning, and philosophy alike. The prohibition of excessive lamentation dates at least to the Hebrew Bible text of Leviticus: "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:28). Without entering into the vast discussion on the interrelations between Platonic thought and Christian theology, the repudiation of performed mourning seems to be a clear common point. For instance, examining the discourses of the Greek Christian fathers, we find profuse condemnations of female lamentation. The list of these homilies is long: for example, Saint John Chrysostom condemns dirges as blasphemies, while he considers lamentation as a remaining pagan custom, a "disease of females" that "still persists" (cited in Alexiou 1974: 28), homologous to a wild dance. As Alexiou points out, there is a demonstrable and embodied "conflict between

the official psalm singing of the Church and the spontaneous lamentation of the people" (1974: 30).

In its attempt to resolve this conflict in its favor, the early Eastern Christian church "tried to detach the ritual, which it found necessary and politic to conserve and possible to christianize, by means of new theological explanations, from the more violent forms and expressions of lamentation which it deemed incompatible with Christianity, such as self-mutilation, and the man-centered, pagan outlook of the ancient lament" (Alexiou 1974: 34). A similar process of domestication seems also to be undertaken with the theatre. Its disappearance from both the Western and the Eastern Christian world is followed, as Antony Kubiak has argued, by its reappearance within the medieval church "first in the ritualized drama of the Mass, and later as the theatricalized trope known as the *Quem Quaeritis*" (1991: 48). The Eastern Christian Mass also incorporated and subsumed several theatrical motifs as it replaced lamentation by official hymns and a Funeral Oration in praise of the dead.

Nevertheless, the funeral lament (*epitaphios thrênos*) returns as a term used on Good Friday, and appears crucial to the religious re-staging of the funeral of Christ. Interestingly, a central part of this litany is the appearance of the Holy Mother as a mourner over the corpse of her dead son. This scene has been portrayed by the great Byzantine hymnographer Romanos the Melodist, in his sixth-century *Lament for the Virgin*. In this text, Mary performs her ineffable pain by fervently wailing and weeping before the moment of the crucifixion. Reproaching his mother for this embodied mourning, her son recommends her to "put aside her grief." Rendered tangible by this strong dramatic dialogue, the aforementioned tension between the theological and the human attitudes toward death, male discursive containment and female performative excess, is made directly manifest. Christ tries to curtail his mother's pathos judging it as a lack of prudence, while "Mary argues with her son, begging himself not to embrace death," pleading with him so that it is "only when he promises to reveal himself to her after death that she consents to wipe her tears" (Holst-Warhaft 1992:138).

Ritual Lament in Modern Rural Greece

This tension between the cultural containment of male theological discourses and female quotidian performances of pain and grief reverberates in a great number of contemporary contexts. One of the most eloquent examples that can be found in rural Greece takes place in the remote village Olymbos on the Dodecanesian island of Karpathos, on Good Friday morning. After the official liturgy and the Psalm of the official "funeral lament," women that lost their relatives during the last year stand in front of an epitaph of Jesus adorned by spring flowers, the photographs of their dead, and written dirges. One after the other, they take a moment of silence before starting to scream for those they lost, pulling their hair, tearing their clothes, and lacerating their cheeks. The evening of the same day, they sing in church the "dirge of the Virgin Mary," a broadly expanded Greek folksong that tells the story of the mourning Holy Mother in front of her son stepping in serenity toward the sacrifice.

Far from being related to any ideological construction of national continuity, the excessive performativity of Olymbos's women is reminiscent of the female lamentation in early Byzantine times, or even in Greek antiquity. This dramatic association could be related to the historical fact that, as Philippe Ariès argued, even if folk discourses about death had been confronted with the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, and in most parts of Europe the separation between the dead and the living has been enacted in the concealment of the corpse, in some parts of the Mediterranean and the Balkan region the dead body remained uncovered, and the rites of death persisted sporadically (1981: 144–6). Christianized as late as the tenth century C.E., the Southern Greek region of Mani is another complex example in which the manifestation of the female performance of

mourning draws attention to an unresolved historical conflict not only with the Christian church, but also with contemporary medicalized attitudes toward death and grief.

Based on thorough ethnographical research in this region, anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis has argued that the ensemble of this tension reflects the theological dissidence, the diametrically opposed worldview between official church and female mourners, despite the fact that the latter undoubtedly consider themselves to be Christians. In the improvised dirges of Mani, death is looked upon as the worst possible calamity, while the imagery of the after-life resembles more closely the ancient Hades than any hope of paradise. Importantly, sometimes God is described as "criminal" or "murderer," while mourners directly address their anger to him: "Hey, you God, from high above / where the gun can't reach you! / Why don't you descend below / to talk about rights?" (Seremetakis 1991: 75, text 17). Allowing for a diachronic view of the topic, Seremetakis concluded:

These various strategies shifting from state to church and then again from church to state in subsequent historical periods, can all be seen as a disciplinary confinement of the dead, whether this confinement is effected for religious, political, and/or medical-sanitary reasons. These strategies of confinement can be viewed as central to the hegemonization of death rites. In other words, the social construction of the dead by legislative, religious, and medical proscriptions is dialectically tied to and may even alter the social/institutional ordering of the living (1991: 171).

Juxtaposing the vocal Maniot mourning to an Athenian silent funeral, Seremetakis suggests that the latter has been felt as a terrifying foreclosure of expression (Seremetakis 1991: 166). But what is at stake here is not simply that death and the public mourning of loss have become internalized taboos in contemporary Western urban societies or, to recall Barthes, that mourning is strategically denied. More importantly, in the current historical moment of late capitalism, the ideological positivity of this denial reflects a hierarchy of power and political belonging: some lives appear to be not considered worthy of being lived (Agamben 1998), or as being capable of being mourned (Butler 2004). Immigrants menaced by the emerging European Neo-Nazi parties, or people living with HIV/AIDS, are just two examples from the long list of these "ungrievable" grievances and griefs.

Lament in Contemporary Performance: The Case of Diamanda Galas

A key example from contemporary performance practice that seeks to address both death rights and rites is the work of the American artist Diamanda Galás. Drawing explicitly on both Antigone's gesture of mourning the unmourned, and the Mani women's scream for vengeance (it is worth noting that her mother is originally from this region), Galás furiously performed, composed, sang, and served as a political activist for people living with HIV/AIDS and the victims of contemporary genocides. Through the visceral materiality of her excessively corporeal performance, as well as the exceptional reach of her three-and-a-half octave vocal range enabling her to emit piercingly high ululations, Galás embodied, but also transubstantiated, essential features of the ritual lamentation. But what makes her work artistically and politically significant, and illustratively explicative of the diachronic conflict between female lament and political or religious power that this entry has attempted to analyze, is the way this conflict becomes incorporated in her compositions. Through a protean vocality, whose constant metamorphosis is at points enhanced electronically, Galàs shifts into different positions: from the patient, sometimes in dementia, to the doctor; from the howl of the mourner to the command-ing voice of the priest (Schwarz 1997; Galás 1996; http://diamandagalas.com, last accessed 22/5/2015).

In the context of the AIDS pandemic in the USA during the 1980s and the early 1990s, and of the several public and performative acts of mourning that emerged at that period, Galás' work *Plague*

Mass criticized state, church, and Bible-based medical discourses for codifying the condition as a divine punishment. In the *Plague Mass*, Galás reconstructs passages of the quintessential Biblical text of exclusion, *Leviticus*, aiming, as she declares, not to represent the disease through her music, but "to be the sound of the plague" (Juno and Vale 1991: 12). A hieratic patriarchal voice is interrupted by responses from the suffering and the dead, alongside new settings of the *Psalms*, as well as Galás' own texts. What starts to be produced is an antiphonal structure between different listening positions and relations of power, echoing obliquely the diachronic tension between female lament and male law examined in this entry.

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